



IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON ELEMENTARY EDUCATION IN E-9 COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic is started as a health crisis but it has immensely affected the educational sector worldwide. Nine countries (i.e. Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, and Pakistan) which belong to the group entitled E-9 Countries are facing serious hardships due to the outbreak of this entirely new and deadly virus. In accordance with the recommendations of WHO the schools are closed to enforce physical distancing and to slow down the infection rates. In this situation there is no other solution than distance education. School closings have far reaching impact on the learners. The aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of this pandemic on elementary education in the E-9 Countries. This is a qualitative study. The methodology used is interpretative document based logical analysis. It has been found that the prolonged lockdown and long closure of schools are posing serious threats to the school education system. It has aggravated inherent inequalities in our education system. There is loss of learning opportunities and it is widening educational gaps. It is enhancing exclusion due to location, poverty, unavailability of resources needed for digital learning that are pushing the children on the margins and increasing the risk of drop outs in elementary education.

KEY WORDS: COVID-19 Pandemic, Elementary education, E-9 countries, Exclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION:

COVID-19 pandemic has posed an unprecedented threat in front of the entire world. It is primarily a health crisis, but it has imposed greater threats in other fields of human endeavor. Researchers and scientists all round the world are striving for the discovery of an effective vaccine or drug to control this pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic in countries belong to E-9 group is part of the worldwide pandemic of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). E-9 Countries is a group of nine most populous countries in the world mainly belong to the South block. It came into being in 1993, in the World Conference at Jomtien. These nine countries are Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan. These countries are not only highly populated countries but have huge number of illiterates and out of school children. The outbreak of this pandemic has made this situation more adverse.

Many governments around the world have been compelled to close educational institutions to break the cycle of transmission of COVID-19 virus. E-9 countries are not exception in this case. COVID-19 pandemic has caused the discontinuation of regular academic discourse. Billions of learners are adversely affected due to institutional closure. To continue the teaching-learning process and to maintain institutional resilience, distance education mainly through digital mode is the only alternative left in this prevailing situation. Governments of different countries are taking several steps to help and support this mode of education in different ways. E-learning platforms have emerged as one of the most potent alternatives to help the students continue their studies during COVID-19 outbreak. But the applicability and feasibility of these strategies are questionable. Unequal access to digital tools, connectivity and lack of training has imposed unseen challenges for governments, schools and teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study the researchers have tried to find out how such abrupt change affects elementary education.

2. OBJECTIVES:

- To find out the strategies taken by the government of E-9 countries to mitigate the crisis.
- To show the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on elementary education in E-9 countries.

3. METHODOLOGY:

This is an essentially a qualitative research. The researchers have followed the interpretive approach. The data is collected from books, journals, government websites and other online sources. Conclusion of the study has been made on the basis of document-based logical analysis. No statistical analysis has been attempted.

4. IMMEDIATE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ELEMENTARY EDUCATION OF E-9 COUNTRIES AND STRATEGIES TAKEN DURING THIS PERIOD:

4.1 Bangladesh:

In Bangladesh, schools are being closed since March 17. Near about 17 million

students [1] are out of school. Education Minister in Bangladesh has announced that the schools will remain closed till 14th of November. The government of Bangladesh has taken some initiatives to propagate digital learning in the country. Digital Content' is a platform that is created to share e-learning content, mainly major subjects like Bengali, English, Mathematics, Science. These contents are prepared in accordance with National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCBT). Another initiative is taken by NCBT and Access to Information (A2I) program of the Prime minister's office to prepare all textbooks for school level.

4.2 Brazil:

Brazil becomes a hotspot in this COVID-19 pandemic as the number of patients infected with COVID-19 is increasing quickly and this country has come to the second position within the world. The first Covid patient was identified in the end of February, and thereafter the cases grew rapidly. When the other countries like India where infection are spreading fast, went to national lockdown, Brazil was against complete lockdown. However, there was partial school closure in Brazil from March 12, when Federal District was announced school closing. Later on other heavily populated states in Brazil, like Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro implemented closure on March 16 [2]. In Brazil the entire school system was closed from March 17 this year. In Brazil, more than 180,000 schools are closed and 47 million students are suffering. The Government of Brazil has taken an initiative 'Banco Internacional de Objetos Educacionais' to support online learning. It provides educational content for entire school level.

4.3 China:

The disease COVID-19 has been originated at the City of Wuhan, in Hubei of China in the middle of December, 2019. In China, the disease was spread rapidly in the first couple of months of this year. The Government took tight measures to restrict the spread of disease across the. As the disease has been originated in China, the country was the first to implement school closure. As the disease is gradually being controlled in China, the Government has started gradual opening in some areas. But due to the second wave, the majority of institutions are closed. The govt. has taken the following steps to ensure teaching – learning in this situation. 'National Cloud Platform for Educational Resources and Public Service' is a huge platform for providing free study materials for school going children. Governments had taken few steps to ensure Education to the disadvantaged children like providing computers to poor students, offering mobile data package and giving subsidy for telecommunications. [3]

4.4 Egypt:

Egypt is also suffering from the worldwide pandemic from the middle of February. The number of cases in this country is lower than countries like Brazil, India. The schools are closed in Egypt from March 15. More than 13 million students are out of school due to closing of schools in Egypt. [4] This country has also endorsed digital learning through two main platforms. 'E-learning' is a platform created by the government to facilitate e-learning mainly for school students. 'MOE E-learning' is the official portal provided by the government. The function of it is to broadcast programs through virtual mode and to provide e-textbooks. Another initiative is to launch Edmodo website. It is a platform for communication between students, teachers and parents.

4.5 India:

The disease spread in India from China. The first case was reported on 30 January 2020. India has gradually become a hotspot of this pandemic, because of huge population and high population density. By mid of 2020, India had approached in position of highest number of daily new cases in world. The Government of India went for mandatory lockdown throughout the country from 24 March, followed by a 14-hour voluntary public curfew. From March 16 schools are closed nationwide. From 1 June, the government started "unlocking" the country (barring "containment zones") in different unlock phases with several new guidelines. Though the period of gradual unlock has started, schools are remaining closed. The Department of School Education of the Government of India has created an online junction called SHAGUN. [5] Under this junction the DSE have launched three e-learning platforms named. NREOE, DIKSHA and e-Pathshala. National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER) is a repository of e-libraries, e-books, e-courses. It provides students a chance to participate in events online, and theme based education. The Ministry of HRD has launched National Digital Infrastructure for Teachers (DIKSHA) portal to equip teachers of school education for e-learning. e-Pathshala is a web-portal for students from class 1st to 12th to make them able to access audios, videos, e-books and Flip Books. The digital repository has been made available by NCERT to make sure that the students do not miss out on any important concept to be taught in the class. E-Pathshala is also available in several languages like the other digital platforms.

4.5 Indonesia:

The COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia is spread later in comparison to previously mentioned countries. The first confirmed case was on 2 March of this year. By 9 April, the pandemic had spread to all provinces in the country. Jakarta, East Java, and West Java are the worst-hit provinces, together accounting almost 48% of the national total cases. [6] The Governments of different islands like Jakarta, Java went for partial lockdown. Instead of implementing a nationwide lockdown, the government had approved large-scale social restrictions. In Indonesia, over 530,000 schools are closed from March. (Indonesian: Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar, abbreviated as PSBB) for some regencies and cities. 'Rumoh Belajar' is the common platform used in Indonesia to provide e-textbooks, learning content. It is also the platform for digital classroom.

4.7 Mexico:

The pandemic was spread in this country from mid-January. A sharp increase in the daily number of corona virus infections and deaths has taken place during October breaking previous records. Schools are closed throughout the country from March 20.

Like other countries, the Government of Mexico also has launched digital learning program. Aprende en Casa means Learn at Home is a program through web, exclusively meant for the elementary school students. The learners can also access educational content through television. But there are remote regions of the country, this programme Aprende en Casa is not available for students. Aprende 2.0 is the e-platform for the Ministry of Public Education for the promotion of ICT and development of digital competence. Libros de texto is the platform designed for preparing the digital version of all textbooks studied at school.

4.8 Pakistan:

The virus was found in Pakistan on 26 February 2020. Later it has been rapidly spread throughout the country. From March 13, all schools are closed in Pakistan. In Pakistan 13,357,618 school students are staying out of school. In Pakistan, the situation is worse as the schools are facing previous closure due to smog. Virtual University of Pakistan has created a portal, named 'open courseware' to work with the digital learning. It also provides e-learning content, study materials for different subjects. Governments of different provinces are trying to circulate educational contents through television.

4.9 Nigeria:

Like the other African countries, the spread of COVID-19 pandemic reached affected Nigeria much later. The first case was reported in the end of February. But it was spread quite rapidly. The government has announced lockdown first in three major cities. But the schools are closed from March 23 throughout the country. Ministry of Education has developed a platform through a task force to provide digital support to the learners. Governments of several states of Nigeria like Ogun and Lagos have adopted popular media channels in radio to access remote areas.

5. MAJOR FINDINGS:

In this situation digital learning is the only alternative left for government. There is a paradigm shift taken place in formal education sector. In this pandemic situation it is not possible to continue normal classroom teaching. As these countries are highly populated, the classrooms are also thickly populated. So, it is impossible to maintain physical distancing in the normal classroom environment or in the playground. As a result, the formal education system has to take refuge to the non-formal system of imparting education through distance mode. Online Learning is the potent alternative as the schools are closed. The countries have introduced several measures to replace the regular classes by introducing distance learning. But this paradigm shift is imposing other major obstacles in front of our education system. The success of distant mode depends on the connectiv-

ity and infrastructure available in the countries and familiarity of teachers, learners and parents with distance learning tools. The following table depicts the comparative data on the population and no of internet users in each of the E-9 countries.

Table1: Data on Population and Internet Users of E-9 Countries

Sl No	Country	Population	Internet users	% of Internet users	Rank in Population	Rank in Internet users
1	Bangladesh ^[7]	164,685,660	102,113,000	62.01	8	100
2	Brazil ^[8]	212,558,178	150,410,801	67.47	6	85
3	China ^[9]	1,439,323,776	904,080,566	63.33	1	98
4	Egypt ^[10]	102,321,109	54,740,141	44.95	13	136
5	India ^[11]	1,379,974,505	718,740,000	54.29	2	120
6	Indonesia ^[12]	273,516,148	171,176,716	64.80	4	91
7	Mexico ^[13]	128,929,303	80,630,752	63.85	10	95
8	Pakistan ^[14]	220,861,534	83,178,124	39.25	5	144
9	Nigeria ^[15]	206,088,236	136,203,231	66.74	7	89

Source: Data compiled from following sources:

- [7] Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission. (2020, June) Internet Subscribers in Bangladesh
 [8] Data Reportal – Global Digital Insights. (2020). Digital 2020: Brazil
 [9] China: Number of Internet Users. (2020).
 [10] Data Reportal – Global Digital Insights. (2020). Digital 2020: Egypt
 [11] TRAI. (2020, 30 June). TRAI Performance Indicator Report Oct-Dec 2019
 [12] APJII. (2019) Internet Indonesia, Polling Indonesia
 [13] Mexico: number of internet users. (2020)
 [14] Telecom Indicators | PTA. (2020)
 [15] National Bureau of Statistics. (2020). Telecoms Data: Active Voice and Internet per State, Porting and Tariff Information

The table shows the inherent weakness lying behind our system. China, which is the most populated country in the world, ranks 98 in the percentage of internet usage. India which is the second most populated country in the world. But only 54.29% of the population is internet users, ranking 120 in the world. The ranks of Brazil and Nigeria are comparatively higher than the other countries, i.e. 85 and 89 subsequently. Pakistan lags far behind among the countries as only 39.25% of the population uses internet. Such poor condition also prevalent in Egypt as only 95% of the population is internet users. It clearly shows that the implementation of online mode of education is how much difficult in these countries.

There are some major barriers in participating in online mode of learning. Two major factors - affordability and accessibility - create hindrance, mainly in low and middle income countries. The cost of devices that are needed to access the internet is quite high. It also involves recurring cost to continue data usage. Network related factors like poor network coverage and quality of connection also contribute to lack of participation in digital mode of learning. Elementary level learners most do not have their own gadgets mainly in rural areas and in low and middle income families. They have to take part in such learning activities with the help of devices owned by guardian. As men are out for work, it becomes more difficult for the children to continue the study. The women who give larger time in rearing children can assist them. But there is a huge gender gap in mobile users among men and women.

Table2: Gender wise distribution of internet users in E-9 Countries

Sl No	Country	% of Internet users- Male	% of Internet users- Female
1	Bangladesh	83	49
2	Brazil	81	71
3	China	82	81
4	India	90	63
5	Indonesia	91	87
6	Mexico	83	66
7	Pakistan	90	42
8	Nigeria	87	69

Source: GSMA (2020) Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020

The gender wise distribution of internet users reveals another grim picture in the forefront. The countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan show wide gender gap in internet usage. Pakistan which ranks slowest among the internet usage (shown in table 1) has widest gender gap. In this country only 42% women uses internet. In Bangladesh the situation is no better as only 49% women have access to internet. In comparison, Indonesia and Brazil have less gender gaps in internet usage whereas India and Mexico have moderate gaps. In comparison, China is the only country that shows gender equality in internet usage.

Complete interruption of regular schooling has major impact on learners in many ways. For instance, inclusive learners have been badly affected by school closing. Differently-abled learners are heavily depended on assistive apparatus that are not available at their home. The children with learning disabilities, psychomotor disabilities are facing huge problems to continue independent study in front of a digital device. Not only teaching learning has been stopped, but closure of schools also caused other adverse effects on the learners. School gives social protection to the learners, provide adequate nutrition. Children from poor families mainly from rural areas are heavily dependent on mid-day meal are suffering badly. Though some countries like India are distributing most essential food grains like rice, pulses, potatoes are distributed from schools and ICDS centers on regular basis to ensure food security among poor students.

Thus there are many risks associated with school closures. It is inculcating the disruption of learning process due to digital exclusion and it will increase drop outs for marginal children. It is uncertain that how long the pandemic will go on and the students will be able to join regular class. This inability to connect with the teachers and to lag behind in their study will have an inevitable effect in increasing the rate of drop outs. As the E-9 countries are the home of majority of worlds out of school children, the situation is going to worsen in near future.

It is quite evident that the situation is bleak. The education sector will bear long term negative impact due to the prolonged lockdown and closure of schools. This pandemic has created a clear regional and economic disparity due to the sudden imposition of digital learning. This digital divide is widening and learners from poor families are gradually moving on the margins.

6. CONCLUSION:

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a huge challenge in front of the total system of education, its stakeholders, policymakers, administrators, and teachers. The pandemic has given no time to get prepared for such an unprecedented situation. The formal education system has to adapt a new mode for which there was no preparation at all. The 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report noted that efforts to maintain learning continuity during the pandemic may have actually worsened exclusion trends. During the height of school closures in April 2020, almost 91% of students around the world were out of school. The mode of online learning is an 'imperfect substitutes for classroom instruction'. [16]

The distance learning is unable to mitigate the problem of disruption of day-to-day schooling and in many cases it is creating larger learning gaps. The learners who are disadvantaged due to several reasons like poor socio-economic background, residing in rural and marginal areas, physically and mentally challenged are facing serious hardships. These learners who are able to have access to education because of inclusive educational policies are suffering exclusion and denied access to this new mode of education.

Mode of operation of digital learning is also complicated for the first generation learners. Elementary learners who belong to the lower grades cannot be able to join this mode without adult help. There are diverse methods involved in this mode of teaching-learning. For example, teachers share videos, audio clippings, send study materials via internet. Online classes are held through various platforms like Google meet, WebEx meet, Zoom, Whatsapp and many more. It needs a level of digital literacy not only on the part of teachers but also among parents. In these E-9 countries there are many first generation learners. For them it is quite impossible to get parental support to participate in online education.

Formal education system has some major functions to fulfill. The major function of education is the academic function i.e. the transmission of knowledge is also not fulfilled because a vast number of students are unable to take part in the teaching-learning process. The other functions of education are not at all fulfilled. Differently-abled learners who are blind, deaf and dumb, physically challenged or mentally retarded are unable to participate and communicate in this mode of teaching-learning. These learners need specialized help to pursue their study what they usually get in their school.

Education is the vehicle of social security for poor students in many ways. They are provided with mid-day meals and regular dose of several supplementary medicines and vaccines. Thus the closure of schools has negative impact on the health and nutrition of learners. Learners falling below the poverty line increase the risk of child labour, violence and abuse on children. Increase in drop outs will inculcate increase in child marriage. During an earlier Ebola epidemic in Africa, many older girls never returned to school once the crisis was over.

The pandemic makes prominent multidimensional inequalities in the system. To mitigate the long term effects of COVID-19 on Elementary Education the teachers, parents and the Government and the policymaker must plan strategies and must implement them effectively. The government has to take the leading role and there should be strong collaboration with NGOs, international stakeholders of Education and implementing authorities like administration and teachers to fight back such a situation and to bring back children to school.

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